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Carrie Daut

The University of Vermont, cdaut@uvm.edu

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A Case for More Yoga on Campus: Yoga as Self-Care for Higher Education and Student Affairs Professionals

Carrie Daut

Since the 1970s, yoga has exploded in popularity in the United States. Its practice has become a widespread exercise craze, a popular tool for self-care, and a billion-dollar industry. Studies illustrating yoga's positive effects on physical and mental health are plentiful. Recently, research has also positioned yoga as an effective tool to combat compassion fatigue. Defined by the Figley Institute (2012) as "the emotional and physical exhaustion that can affect helping professionals and caregivers over time" (p. 4), compassion fatigue is a common risk for individuals in helping, advocacy, and broader social justice roles. While yoga interventions are growing among other helping professions including nursing, counseling, and teaching, few studies have explored the implications of yoga as self-care for higher education and student affairs professionals engaged in social justice work on the 21st century college campus. This paper will begin with a glimpse into the author's personal yoga narrative, followed by an overview of the factors that show why now is a critical time to bring more yoga to campus.

My personal yoga practice began in 2012 with a weekly yoga class at a local gym. As the weeks passed, I began daydreaming about a more immersive yoga experience, and in 2014 I traveled to Tulum, Mexico to practice yoga twice a day for one week under a palm-leaf palapa. I returned from Tulum and discovered a new yoga studio in my neighborhood. There, I learned a new style of yoga (Baptiste Power Vinyasa yoga), started practicing 4-5 times per week, and saw, for the first time, how a yoga practice could influence my life both on and off the yoga mat.

It is important for me to explain that yoga is referred to as a *practice*, not a *routine* or an *exercise*. The word practice is commonly used in the yoga community as a way of acknowledging that there will be good days and bad days; practitioners will fall

Carrie Daut is the Student Leadership Coordinator at the University of Vermont's Honors College and a first-year student in UVM's Higher Education and Student Affairs graduate program. She received her B.A. in Economics from the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, VA in 2009. Her higher education interests include enrollment management, integrative wellness, and college access for undocumented students. Her yoga interests include pigeon pose, playing in arm balances, and one day completing yoga teacher training.

in and out of yoga poses, and practitioners will fall in and out of healthful habits. There is a yoga philosophy that claims how we show up on the yoga mat is how we show up in our lives; how we react to discomfort, change, fear, and opportunity on the yoga mat is a mirror for how we react to those same experiences in life. I knew yoga had become an integral part of my identity when I began connecting my behaviors on the yoga mat to my behaviors in the rest of my life.

First, yoga is teaching me to be kind to myself. One of my favorite yoga teachers used to guide the class through a series of increasingly advanced poses, and as we fell out of poses, she would ask us, “Now what did the voice in your head say to yourself when you fell? How do you speak to yourself?” Noticing the grace I give myself on the yoga mat helps me notice the grace I give, or do not give, myself in the rest of my life.

Yoga is also teaching me to be present in the moment. My favorite yoga teachers not only guide the class through a rigorous physical practice but also remind us, “If you are thinking about what happened at work today, push that thought away. If you are thinking about what to make for dinner, push that away. You chose to be here, so be here.” Practicing presence on the yoga mat improves my presence in other areas of my life. I notice it in staff meetings and in conversations with students. Since beginning a regular yoga practice, I multitask less, and I engage more.

Finally, yoga is teaching me equanimity, otherwise known as non-reactivity. Baptiste Power Vinyasa yoga defines equanimity as “the art of meeting life as it meets you—calmly, without drama or fuss” (Baptiste, 2004, p. 123). On the yoga mat, equanimity is often associated with balance poses. In yoga, balance is difficult to achieve when the physical body overreacts and overcorrects. Balance is achieved with calm, intentional movements. Off of the yoga mat, equanimity affects how I behave in stressful situations. Practicing non-reactivity helps me replace hurried reaction with calm response.

My capacities for this grace, presence, and non-reactivity are all enriched by my yoga practice. And, I consider these three qualities to be essential for sustained work in higher education and student affairs. This year, as I began a graduate program and a new role at a university, I realized my yoga practice has the ability not only to support my personal wellness but also to improve my professional effectiveness. Therefore, it surprises me that yoga is not more prominent among higher education and student affairs professionals. Ample research exists demonstrating yoga’s positive effects on both physical and mental health, especially for professionals in helping roles, and outreach programming from the yoga community is frequently connected to issues of access, equity, and inclusion. With these ties to both self-care and social justice, higher education and student affairs professionals have much to gain from increased yoga on campus.

Defining Yoga

In Sanskrit, the classical language of India, “yoga” means “union.” Yoga is the practice of uniting the body and the mind, of connecting the physical to the emotional. Over 21 million U.S. adults practice yoga today (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2015), but yoga’s history extends back more than 5,000 years (Hirschl, 2011). The word “yoga” first appeared in the *Rig Veda*, the oldest known text written in Sanskrit and an important religious manuscript of the Indus Valley civilization, located in present-day Pakistan and northwest India (Hirschl, 2011). Because the *Rig Veda* is a sacred text of Hinduism, yoga is often closely tied to the Hindu religion. However, yoga is not classified as a religion nor is it exclusive to Hinduism. Ancient Hinduism adopted the practice of yoga, as did other world faiths such as Buddhism and ancient Egyptian religion, known today as Kemetism (American Yoga Association, n.d.). For the purpose of this article, it is important to note I refer to “yoga” as the practice of uniting the body and the mind; I do not assign a religious context when using the word “yoga.”

The practice of yoga did not gain popularity in the West until the turn of the 20th century when Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu monk, spoke at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair as part of a global faith dialogue (Yoga Basics, n.d.). Vivekananda is credited with introducing both Hinduism and yoga practice to mainstream America during his attendance at the World’s Fair and his subsequent national tour. In 1947, yoga instructor Indra Devi opened one of the first American yoga studios in Hollywood, California, propelling Western yoga into the spotlight (Yoga Basics, n.d.). Finally, the proliferation of neighborhood fitness centers in the 1970s and the advent of the at-home video workout ultimately legitimized yoga as an effective form of exercise (Singleton, 2001).

Yoga’s popularity in the 21st century is now highly modernized and hyper-Westernized; in many ways, today’s yoga bears little resemblance to that of ancient India. In the United States today there are over 20 different disciplines of yoga. Although most disciplines share a focus of combining physical postures (*asana*) with breath control (*pranayama*), styles vary widely and discipline and brand loyalty is fierce. As of 2013, Americans spent \$27 billion per year on yoga products and services, and both yoga participation and spending are expected to increase (Gregoire, 2013).

Yoga and Self-Care

Many yoga practitioners describe their yoga commitment as a form of self-care that addresses both physical and emotional concerns. According to the World Health Organization (1983, Definition of Self-Care, para. 1), self-care “refers to the activities individuals, families and communities undertake with the

intention of enhancing health, preventing disease, limiting illness, and restoring health. They are undertaken by lay people on their own behalf.” In the field of higher education and student affairs, self-care is an important topic to address and encourage as higher education and student affairs professionals are often charged to work long hours, to work unpredictable hours, and to fulfill multiple roles simultaneously. Concern for student wellbeing can be emotionally draining for student affairs professionals, and compared to “professionals in other fields with similar education levels, entry-level positions in student affairs are low-paying” (Janosik, Creamer, Hirt, Winston, Saunders, & Cooper, 2004, p. 76). These conditions and others contribute to high burnout and attrition rates in the field of higher education and student affairs, with as many as 50-60% of new professionals leaving the field within the first five years of their careers (Tull, 2006). In fields susceptible to such high levels of burnout, practices to restore health and limit physical and mental illnesses are imperative; self-care is critical to maintaining both job satisfaction and personal wellness (Kinkade, 2015).

Studies linking yoga to improved personal wellness are already abundant. In 2009, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania found that participants’ blood pressure readings showed meaningful decreases after completing a 12-week yoga program (Cohen et al., 2013). Eastman-Mueller, Wilson, Jung, Kimura, and Tarrant (2013) found that an 8-week yoga intervention for students at the University of Missouri produced statistically significant reductions in levels of stress, worry, and depression. For many years, the U.S. yoga community has upheld the philosophy that “issues are in your tissues” (Hicks, 2014), indicating that humans store emotions in the body. The jaw, shoulders, neck, hips, and digestive system receive special attention from yoga instructors and practitioners who interpret physical discomfort as an indicator of emotional distress and believe one is restored by addressing the other. A study conducted by Nummenmaa, Glerean, Hari, and Hietanen (2014) supported the “issues in your tissues” theory. The study showed participants an emotional word, story, movie, or facial expression and asked them to pinpoint the body region most affected while viewing each emotional stimulus. Across participants of both Western European and East Asian descent, different emotions were consistently associated with specific body regions, leading the authors to suggest that emotional processing could be critically influenced by physical experience (Nummenmaa et al., 2014).

Over the past 10 years, yoga has been documented as a successful self-care tool for several special populations. At the University of Texas at Austin, yoga therapy is integrated into student recovery programs for drug and alcohol addiction (Kinkade, 2015); the Trauma Center at the Justice Resource Institute in Brookline, Massachusetts offers yoga as a clinical treatment for trauma or treatment-resistant post-traumatic stress disorder (Trauma Center at the Justice Resource Institute, n.d.); and additional yoga interventions have been successfully implemented

with schizophrenia patients and with college-age women experiencing body dissatisfaction (Bangalore & Varambally, 2012; Clancy, 2010).

Yoga as a Tool to Combat Compassion Fatigue

In addition to improving physical wellness, yoga can also serve as an effective tool to address job dissatisfaction among professionals experiencing high levels of stress and burnout at work. With prolonged exposure to work related stress and burnout, these individuals can become at risk of developing a type of traumatization known as compassion fatigue. According to the Figley Institute (2012), compassion fatigue is defined as “the emotional and physical exhaustion that can affect professionals and caregivers over time” (p. 4). It is “an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped” to the degree that it can create a secondary traumatic stress for the helper” (Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project, n.d.). Current compassion fatigue research illustrates these negative effects in traditional helping roles such as nursing, teaching, and licensed therapy, and other professionals with cited links to compassion fatigue include social workers, doctors, and family or juvenile law lawyers. More severe than general burnout, compassion fatigue is associated with desensitization to patient stories, decrease in quality of care for patients/clients, increase in clinical errors, and higher rates of depression and anxiety among helpers (Figley Institute, 2012). Of particular concern are studies finding that compassion fatigue impacts helpers’ empathy and ability to connect with others—the qualities that often brought helpers into their chosen career fields in the first place (Figley Institute, 2012).

The field of higher education and student affairs is considered, at the very least by its own constituents, to be a helping profession (Reynolds, 2009), with both CAS and the ACPA-NASPA Professional Competency Areas listing helping skills as an essential proficiency for the career field (ACPA & NASPA, 2015; CAS, 2012). However, compared to other helping professions, limited research exists investigating the link between compassion fatigue and higher education and student affairs. Recent studies by Ward-Roof and Guthrie (2011), Bestler (2012), and Stoves (2014) discuss the development and experiences of compassion fatigue in higher education and student affairs professionals, but further research and discussion of intervention strategies is needed.

In other helping roles susceptible to compassion fatigue, yoga is one intervention strategy already proving effective to address stress and burnout in the workplace. Among nursing professionals, a recent study found that after participation in an 8-week yoga intervention, nurses reported higher levels of self-care and less emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Alexander, Rollins, Walker, Wong, & Pennings, 2015). A 2008 article revealed results of a 4-year qualitative study in which

counseling graduate students reported positive change in their counseling skills and therapeutic relationships following a 15-week mindfulness course incorporating yoga (Schure, Christopher, & Christopher, 2008). A study of yoga intervention for community mental health counselors conducted at Oregon State University found that participants experienced a decrease in negative thinking, increased hope, and elevated levels of energy during counseling sessions (Murphy, 2013). Still, yoga interventions among higher education and student affairs professionals remain rare. These practitioners are considered helping professionals vulnerable to compassion fatigue, yet yoga as a research-based technique for self-care has achieved only moderate popularity within the academy. For many higher education and student affairs professionals, this hesitancy may lie in yoga's most common critiques: its accessibility and inclusivity, and the colonization of yoga.

Yoga's Limitations

The colonization of yoga over the past 70 years has occurred as Americans encountered traditional Indian yoga, adjusted and eradicated parts of the practice to fit Western market demands, and profited from the growth of the U.S. industry. Prominent yoga studios have been criticized for hanging the Om symbol backwards, mispronouncing Sanskrit terms, and repackaging yoga as physical mastery for its own sake (Barkataki, 2015; Das, 2013). Yoga's colonization gained extensive media attention in 2014 and 2015. In late 2014, India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, created a new ministry for the promotion of yoga and traditional medicine, announcing an initiative to have yoga classified as cultural property of India and return yoga's credit to its home country (Angre, 2014). In 2015, parents challenged yoga in Southern California schools, alleging that it promoted religion (Hinduism) in public schooling (*Sedlock v. Baird*, 2015). When a judge ruled in *Sedlock v. Baird* (2015) that yoga could continue in the schools because U.S. yoga is "ubiquitous in secular culture" (p. 895), does not endorse religion, and that the school district's replacement of Sanskrit terms with "kid-friendly" names (p. 883) supported this secular nature, critics asserted that a legal precedent had been set to justify the cultural appropriation of yoga.

Issues of access and inclusivity also permeate yoga culture. Yoga is largely associated with White, wealthy, able-bodied, skinny, cisgender women (Singh, 2013). In a two-year study of the yoga industry's leading magazine, *Yoga Journal*, less than 1% of contributors were South Asian, and no South Asian *yogis*, a term for practitioners of yoga, ever appeared on a cover (Singh, 2013). When a yoga studio owner in the Pacific Northwest attempted to disrupt Westernized yoga's White reputation by advertising a weekly People of Color yoga class in October 2015, she received death threats and a complaint for discriminatory practice (Jackson, 2015). Cost (the average one-hour yoga class costs \$10 - \$20), gendered language ("This is a good pose for women; men may want to adjust like this"),

and body shaming create additional barriers to yoga. Many Americans who could benefit from the physical and mental results of yoga do not feel welcome in yoga spaces.

Yoga and Social Justice

For higher education and student affairs professionals considering yoga as a form of self-care, it is important to also provide context for yoga's connection to social justice work. The yoga community is not without its limitations. However, yoga can be, and is being, used to facilitate self-inquiry, expand opportunities, and promote healing for those who practice it. Yoga studios and yoga nonprofit organizations bring yoga to oppressed, marginalized, and disempowered communities around the world. Groups such as Yoga Behind Bars and Prison Yoga Project teach yoga in prisons, jails, and detention centers. Street Yoga leads trauma-informed yoga classes for youth who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The Transformation Yoga Project partners with yoga studios, treatment facilities, and sober-living homes to offer yoga programs for addiction treatment. Across the United States, individual yoga studios offer Queer and Trans* Yoga and People of Color Yoga classes. Organizations such as Comeback Yoga, Connected Warriors, and the Exalted Warrior Foundation assist veterans in accessing yoga, adaptive yoga, and trauma-conscious yoga therapy. In Kenya, Africa Yoga Project organizes yoga teacher training for young people in Nairobi's urban slums, who then teach yoga in Kenyan schools, HIV/AIDS support groups, prisons, and rural villages (Africa Yoga Project, n.d.). At the University of California, Berkeley's Center for Race & Gender, members of the U.S. yoga community dialogue in the Race & Yoga Research Working Group, critiquing Westernized yoga's deficiencies and developing strategies for improvement (University of California, Berkeley, n.d.).

When practiced regularly, the physicality of yoga can also serve as preparation for sustained social justice work. Tessa Hicks Peterson (2015), faculty member of the yoga nonprofit Off the Mat Into the World, described this connection:

In yoga we're physically putting ourselves in uncomfortable positions all the time, right? We find our breath...learn how to live at that edge and find compassion for ourselves. This is the same with social injustice. We can't be afraid to face our ignorance or internal biases, our fears and apathy, our own oppression and pain; we must sit in that discomfort and learn how to find our breath and connect and build compassion for ourselves and for others.

Implications for Higher Education and Student Affairs

Higher education and student affairs professionals who are interested in diversifying their self-care strategies, concerned about their risk for compassion fatigue, or seeking personal wellness habits that incorporate a social justice lens should examine opportunities for yoga in their lives. These professionals should investigate yoga offerings at local community centers and private studios, as well as online resources such as yoga videos and podcasts. Higher education and student affairs professionals should also assess the yoga climate on their campuses by reflecting on the following areas:

- Higher education and student affairs professionals should inquire about the cost of yoga at their institutions: Is yoga free? If not, is it cost prohibitive? Are other wellness services free on campus, such as flu shots or counseling sessions? Why is yoga categorized or not categorized with other free campus services?
- Higher education and student affairs professionals should examine the schedules and spaces affiliated with on-campus yoga classes: When and where is yoga offered? Is the space centrally located? Are classes offered at different times throughout the day to accommodate varied working schedules? Are classes open to students and staff members, or are staff-only classes offered? Who teaches yoga on campus, and what identities do they hold? Who would feel welcome in yoga classes on campus?
- And, higher education and student affairs professionals should consider yoga's niche within campus: If yoga is offered, what departments offer it? Is yoga advertised exclusively as "physical fitness?" Or is it connected to campus mental health initiatives? How do departments such as health centers, counseling centers, and mindfulness offices promote yoga as self-care?

Higher education and student affairs professionals should then take action on their campuses. After evaluating the yoga climate on campus, professionals should speak to colleagues, supervisors, and human resources departments to determine ways to make yoga more inclusive on campus. In doing so, campus leaders should consider partnerships with local yoga studios, many of which coordinate free or donation-based outreach programs that could significantly increase yoga accessibility for the campus community.

Conclusion

This paper outlined the significant research that exists illustrating yoga's physical, mental, and emotional benefits. The author also shared part of her personal yoga narrative, providing examples of the ways in which a regular yoga practice is helping her better connect to herself, her loved ones, and her role as a higher education and student affairs professional. As professionals within the field of higher education and student affairs continue their work in helping roles, providing care for students, they should also prioritize care for the self. Especially when the exhaustion of compassion fatigue threatens to impact educators' effectiveness and ability to sustain a place in the profession, higher education and student affairs professionals should be reflective and creative in how they practice self-care. With its correlations to improved physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing, yoga has the potential to advance self-care for all professions. With its additional ties to social justice work, yoga has the potential to revolutionize self-care for the field of higher education and student affairs.

Yoga means union. It is a practice of uniting the body and the mind, of connecting the physical to the emotional. It is a practice of caring for the whole self, a philosophy that will resonate with many higher education and student affairs professionals in their call to care for and educate the whole student. As the field of higher education and student affairs moves forward in its efforts to embrace health and wellness during the 21st century, now is a critical time to bring more yoga to campus.

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